

SALON ARTISTS AND THE RISE OF THE INDIAN PUBLIC

[The *Ramayana* and the *Mahdbharata* contain] the most inexhaustible . . . stores for pictorial representation which any country possesses. All that is needed to promulgate their beauty and complete their fame is that in their purer and nobler passages and with the powers of European Art, they should engage the service of the national pencil as they have fastened on the national memory and animated the national voice.

Address by Lord Napier, the Governor of Madras, 1871

CHANGING RULES OF PATRONAGE

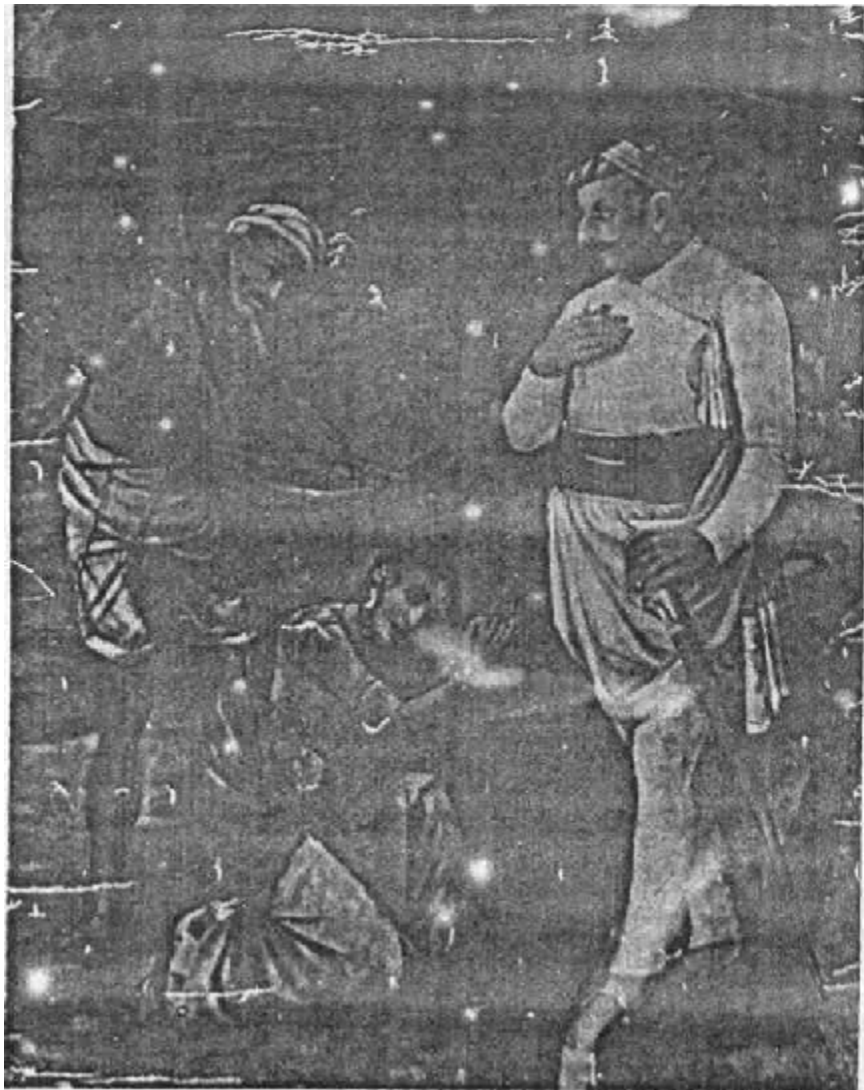
The growing vogue for salon art

Salon art, or academic naturalism, held sway in Europe in the last century, the most celebrated practitioners of which were the *artistes pompiers* of France and the 'olympians' of Britain. Its dominance in Indian art schools was symptomatic of the growing hold of naturalism in Indian society at large. The commissions won by art students in Calcutta and Bombay were the stepping-stones to their calling as salon artists. Unlike an uncertain future in the applied arts, the European teachers who groomed their students for a career in academic art had the backing of influential English officials. These officials took the view that Indian miniatures, for instance, no matter how skilful, were bereft of the moral concern that distinguished high art, whose pinnacle was history painting. However, if providence had deprived India of the fine arts, it had nonetheless provided her with the wherewithal to produce them, as the decorative arts proved. Hence, it behoved the rulers, such as the Governor of Madras at a public lecture in 1871, to direct the Indian painter towards the rich mythological lore that waited to be tapped with 'all the powers of European art'.

Although there were oil painters in India before the 1870s, the rise of salon artists coincided with radical changes in artistic patronage. Three cases mentioned here will help us to appreciate the later developments.

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Kundanlal Mistri (1850-1930) joined the Bombay art school in 1889) (Fig. 31). After winning a gold medal for freehand drawing, he went up to the Slade School in London to learn the secrets of figure painting. There he won a prize for a class study. A protege of the Maharana of Mewar, a princely state relatively untouched by English education, Kundanlal returned to Mewar to spend his life as a court painter.² Despite his exposure to the new world of art, he remained dependent on traditional patronage. Two early Parsi painters trained in Europe, N. N. Writer and Navroji, were unable to set up an independent practice. Ravi Varma's brother, who knew them, spoke of Navroji: 'Poor man, he gets no orders



31Kundanlal Mistri:
Begging Forgiveness,
oil, 1897

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though he had learnt painting in Europe ... He says it is hard to get on here'.³

From personal to institutional patronage

And yet, within a decade the new artists enjoyed an institutional support that was not confined to a particular region. The remarkable success of salon art followed a social revolution. The patronage of artists by individual aristocrats was in decline, to be replaced by the support of an art-conscious public. Artists now depended heavily on exhibitions, a change that can be gauged by similar developments in the West. In the eighteenth century, the rise of the art exhibition, art criticism and an art-conscious public owed to a change in the public's relationship to art and in the role of the artist himself. As early as 1808, artists used exhibitions to publicise their work. Diverse views on their works stimulated discussion.⁴

In India, art societies created the conditions for the diffusion of salon art. They were heirs to the eighteenth-century French salon, which moulded public taste through annual exhibitions, catalogues and reviews by prominent critics, such as Diderot. In 1769, the initiative passed on to the Royal Academy in Britain. The pre-eminence of Britain was recognised by the French painter, Jacques-Louis David: 'In our own time this custom of showing the arts "to the public is practised in England and is called Exhibition . . . [it] was introduced in the last century by Van Dyck: the public came in crowds to admire his work: he gained by this means considerable fortune'. Art societies in India took their cue from the Royal Academy, which in 1769 expected George III to uphold the public function of painting as 'the head of a great . . . Nation'.⁶ The connection between art and nationhood is clearly spelt out here; the duty of artists as public-spirited figures was to paint.

Art societies were part of a larger process of the advent of European institutions in India. First formed by Europeans, associations were soon taken over by Indians for their own ends. Societies were set up by the English-educated with great zeal and deployed with consummate skill. In 1838, the Bengalis had formed the Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge, barely twelve years after the founding of its parent body in London: Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge.⁷ There was a proliferation of interest groups, forming and informing public opinion, lobbying in favour of particular issues and maintaining pressure on the government. The political importance of these associations in the rise of the Indian National Congress is increasingly recognised.⁸

Art societies were originally founded for British amateur artists in India, the Brush Club of Calcutta holding an exhibition in 1831. With the admission of Indians, they turned into an instrument of Raj patronage,

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promoting the interests of the growing community of academic artists. Annual exhibitions held by these societies were attended by the general public and widely reported in the press. Each season, the *Dines of India*, for instance, published as many as five notices of the Bombay Art Society exhibition. Prize-winners were lionised in the press.⁹ Journalism, the creator of public opinion in India, helped evolve an art-conscious public. In Britain, when public taste emerged in the eighteenth century, it was confined to 'rich consumers of the arts'.¹⁰ While the Indian public was not always the wealthiest, it took a lively interest in art; and it was without exception English-literate.

The new patronage turned out to be a mixed blessing for Indian artists. The sales at shows were unpredictable, while artists lost the economic security of aristocratic patronage. The compensation was the publicity received, hitherto unthinkable in traditional artistic transactions. The earliest reliable figures for exhibition goers in India are scanty and available only in the case of Simla, the exclusive summer retreat of the Viceroy visited by British army officers, civilians and their families. The annual average turnout there was about two thousand until the First World War. If a small resort like Simla attracted such high numbers, one could well imagine how many more turned up in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras."

Annual exhibitions of art societies

Many of the British residents and their wives were talented amateurs who organised the art society exhibitions. These were held at different times of the year to enable individuals to enter the same work for different shows around the country. The exhibition circuit had its regulars, while newspaper reports convey to us the excitement generated by the shows. The exhibition seasons in Simla, Pune, Bombay, Madras and Calcutta, the chief venues, clearly avoided the summer heat. The Calcutta season fell during Christmas, that of Bombay and Madras was around February. Simla's was in September, 'when the Rains were over, [and] Simla was really delightful'.¹² From the viewpoint of Anglo-Indian society, no exhibition was more prestigious than the one in Simla. Although, as the chief patron, the Viceroy was expected to grace the show with his presence, later that duty devolved on to lesser officials. Elgin and Curzon dispensed with the ritual of the opening address. Notwithstanding, Simla remained the favourite of the English amateur. According to Sir Richard Temple, there 'was a galaxy of amateur talent in water-colour painting then at Simla. Who that beheld them can forget the productions of Colonel Walter Fane . . . Major Baigree ... [and] Captain St John . . . ?' From 1865 onwards, five to six hundred works were shown annually. Michael Buddulph, a friend of Temple, was the presiding spirit in Simla.

Publications such as *The Indian Charivari* capture the flavour of contemporary reviews. As its coverage of the 1872 Simla exhibition makes clear, landscape painting was a favourite pastime of the British, especially army officers. The comic magazine reassured its readers that the light and shade in Colonel Brown's *Women Going to a Native Marriage* was well managed, refuting another critic who had alleged that he had not done himself justice that year. Colonel Fane's work, *Venetian Fishing Boats*, 'more thoroughly [brought] to one's recollection the Adriatic'. His *Junks in the Hong Kong Harbour* was, however, criticised as being too uniform, while Major Baigree's *Peep on the Punchmuree Road* was 'very good indeed'. Temple mentioned Baigree as 'one of the best amateur artists ever known in India'. But *The Indian Charivari's* laurels went to *The Best Head of the Season* and its author, Thomas Landseer (brother of Edwin Landseer), the 'best hand of the season'.¹⁴

Social events marked the Simla exhibition, rivalling if not surpassing it. The seasons were enlivened by parodies of the exhibits, as in this passage by Rudyard Kipling as a young journalist:

Mr C.P.I....t's filbert's] 'There is no place like home', though a palpable plagiarism from Sir Edwin Landseer, will, it is to be feared, be caviare to the general... A grand subject by the same is 'Better Fifty Years of Europe than a Cycle of Cathay'. All that is seen in this ultra Whistlerian canvas is the stern of a P & O steamer looming through the fog."

Good-humoured lampooning of exhibits, especially by high officials such as Sir Courtney Ilbert, was an accepted part of the game. The top award in Simla was offered by the Viceroy. The prizes were so attractive that painters from as far afield as Britain were keen to enter the competition. Nor were visiting artists such as R. D. Mackenzie averse to participating. He was in India to paint the official picture of the Durbar of 1903. The best years of the society appear to have been between 1909-14, when the number of exhibits rose from 655 to 1073 and the participants' enthusiasm was matched by that of the public.

Initially amateurs dominated the exhibitions, but soon it became apparent that the preservation of standards, not to mention the survival of the shows, depended on professionals. Though Indians were never actively debarred, most of them could not afford to exhibit outside their home towns. The exceptions were Ravi Varina, Manchershaw Pithawalla and Jamini Gangooley, the three regular prizewinners at Simla. According to a contemporary observer, 'with the exception of Mr. J. P. Gangooley and one or two others, there were few Indian exhibitors of merit until [the 1920s], but stimulated by special prizes, there has of late been an increasing number of exhibits by Indians, some of which show great skill, while others are excellent of their class'.¹⁷

Even at Simla, the most English venue, the usefulness of an art society as an 'unofficial' channel for 'improving' Indian taste was not lost on the

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Raj. Besides the fact that these societies enjoyed Viceregal blessing, high officials themselves were keen participants. Temple, *The Indian Charivari's* 'Knight of the Brush', was an amateur watercolourist who voraciously sketched Indian scenes. In 1868, he submitted his very first watercolours to the Simla exhibition. No less a person than Lord Lytton, the Viceroy, stnt his copy of Titian to one of the Simla shows.¹⁸ Precisely because the Simla art society was for fine arts and dominated by Europeans in 1879 a rival exhibition of applied arts was held in the town with government encouragement. In 1885, Durferin, in his opening address to the Simla exhibition, did not miss the opportunity to restate the official view: 'if a zeal and genuine love, of art were widely diffused among our wealthier Indian fellow subjects, a hugely honourable, lucrative and useful career would be opened to hundreds and hundreds of aspiring young men . . .'.²⁰

The Raj obsession with 'improving' Indian taste did occasionally cause resentment among Anglo-Indians. The 1884 season disappointed some of them, to judge by a pamphlet of the time. Its anonymous author, a woman artist, complained of declining numbers and falling standards. She held the Viceroy culpable with his non-committal opening address. Assailing the lack of an official policy towards the resident English, she demanded more positive support.²¹

The nature of Raj patronage of Indian salon artists is indicated by the special category, 'excellent of their class'. If the colonial regime encouraged Indians at these shows, it also marginalised them under the rubric, 'native work in a particular medium'. Ravi Varma and other early Indian artists won awards in this category, which clearly demarcated Europeans from Indians, even if both were salon artists. Whatever style they painted in, Indians were seen as having clear cultural attributes, as in Britain women artists 'were treated . . . as distinct from mainstream cultural activity . . .'.²² In India this was an echo of the racial segregation in the bureaucracy, where 'covenanted' posts were almost exclusively reserved for Europeans, while Indians filled the lower echelons. And yet, for a successful implant of naturalism in India, the aim of the officials, Indian artists could not be indefinitely excluded from the mainstream. So-in practice the successful salon artist soon transcended the category, 'native artist'. A concept of difference, nonetheless, defined colonial art policy.²³

Shows in Madras and Bombay, metropolitan centres

British exclusiveness was harder to maintain in Madras, Bombay and Calcutta, where the Indian elite outnumbered Europeans. The oldest permanent art society in India was the Fine Arts Society of Madras, founded by the British in the 1860s. Many of its members were keen, women amateur painters. Since the art school in Madras, was craft-oriented, few local students took part in the shows. One of the first Indians

to do so was Ravi Varma, whose reputation was made there in 1873. This southern society was disbanded early in this century. Today, very little is known about it, except that Edgar Thurston was the Honorary Secretary in its crucial years. In 1901-2, as keeper of the Government Museum of Madras, he formed a pioneer collection of the nature school of painting according to the Western canon'.²⁴ The best paintings by Indians were chosen from the Society's exhibitions. Raja and Ravi Varma were persuaded to donate their works, whilst Pithawalla and J. P. Gangooly were purchased for the Museum.³⁵

On the west coast, around 1873, the first art society was formed at Pune. A military station, its shows were dominated by local army officers. A great deal more is known, about the Bombay Art Society, the only one that is still active. Founded in 1888 to encourage amateurs and to 'educate' public opinion, it held its early exhibitions at the art school. Though the Society later moved to the Town Hall, its close links with the school in promoting academic art were not severed. The successive Governors, Reay-Lloyd and Brabourne, were active patrons not only of the Society but of art in Bombay.²⁶

The Bombay exhibitions were major social events. The Society met before the show to decide on framing, hanging, and photographing works for the catalogue. The first exhibition opened on 19 February 1889 to the strains of the British national anthem played by a Marine battalion. The grand occasion was presided over by the Governor of Bombay, while the chief guests were the Duke and Duchess of Connaught, representing the British monarch in India. Some two hundred members were present. About five hundred pictures, a great many of them by amateurs, were hung. The Governor's prizes went to the two favourites of Simla, Colonel Strahan for his landscape, *Native Huts at Bichu, Masoori*, and Mrs H. W. Ulith for her figure study, *A Surati Boy*. In the Indian section, five 'native gentlemen', as the *Times of India* put it, received awards. A portrait by the art student Pestonji Bomanji was judged the best. The Governor, Lord Reay, complimented him and Ravi Varma, the two rising stars of salon art.²⁷ Several days later a sumptuous *conversazione* (a typical Victorian social occasion for self-improvement) was held with a band adding a festive note. The *Times of India* reviewed the works on the 25th, boasting that the event was far more interesting than the 'good old exhibition . . . in another place'.²⁸ This was a playful reference to Simla, 'top of the pecking order'.

Bearing in mind Indian susceptibilities, the Society made arrangements for Indian ladies to visit the show in *purdah*. There were participating women artists but expatriate Englishwomen dominated the exhibitions, as for instance in 1892. Putlibai Wadia and K. K. Kama, from the westernised Parsi community, were the rare Indian exceptions.²⁹

The detailed reviews covering the shows for days in the *Times of India* indicate the growth of art criticism. The exhibitions were often a pretext

for showing off works by British artists in private collections. But even great reputations fell victim to the reviewer's intrepid pen. In 1898, the leading painter Herkomer's portrait of Lord Harris was dismissed as failing to capture his characteristic expression.³⁰ Ravi Varm too received some candid remarks on Ins works (Fig. 32). In 1894 the reviewer pointed out that not only was his range of subjects as wide as last year, but his



32 Ravi Varma: *Sairindhrt*,
oil. Bombay Art Society
exhibition, 1891

execution was much above the 'mediocrity that then characterised his work' The likenesses were pleasing and the drawing of heads and hands excellent, though the drapery was 'difficult to tackle'. His Damayanti, 'with her poor eyes quenched with weeping, and her attitude of disconsolate loveliness [was] very powerfully depicted' (Fig. 33).³¹ In 1896 Varma's prize-winning *Brave Kusumavati* was quaintly de-



33 Ravi Varma: *Damayanti in Distress*, oil. Bombay Art Society, 1894

scribed as 'a lady of ancient times in distress'. Though he won yet another prize with his *Harishchandra and Taramati*, the newspaper refused "to bow to the consensus. While *Moonrise at the Apollo Bundar* achieved 'a clear piece of colour and an admirable effect [it was] spoilt by the impossible size of the moon as compared with the man in the boat'. About his younger brother, Raja Varma's *Pining For Freedom* the reviewer had this to say: 'Why paint face so fair? They are natives of this country, yet [their] flesh tones are paler than [those of] Europeans'. Another canvas by Ravi Varma was patronisingly described as a 'lovely bit of colour, marred by over blackness of the hair'. The paper ended on a generous note: 'It is delightful to see what strides the artist makes. One of the two edges of that dangerous weapon, colour, has very happily become blunt, and both this picture and that next to it are full of promise'.³²

The success in Bombay, as in Simla, depended on professional artists, many of whom submitted works in the hope of selling. Augusto Felici, the Italian sculptor, was resident at the Baroda court during 1892—5. Although he had left India by 1896, his works were entered by Baroda. James Payton, the first teacher at the Bombay art school, regularly submitted his works but sometimes failed to receive a favourable notice. Other teachers at government art schools were regular contributors. Griffiths' ambitious work, *The Temple Steps*, destined for the Royal Academy, was shown here in 1892. Two years later, Jobbins, head of the Calcutta art school, sent his views of Kanchenjanga and Venice, produced on 'furloughs' from the school. In 1898, Havell's landscapes drew admiring comments for their professionalism and '*plein-air*' effect.; j He was probably the first to show works in a post-Impressionist style in India. An accomplished painter from a family of artists, Havell's other preoccupations prevented him from developing his career as a painter. Normally, the annual shows at the Bombay Art Society were for the benefit of local artists, mostly from the art school. Well-known outsiders were Ravi and Raja Varma, temporary residents in Bombay, and Jamini Gangooly (Fig. 34). By 1898, a fate similar to that of Simla overtook the Society. The *Times of India* lamented falling standards and poor sales, though the works were 'reasonably priced'.^{*13}

Exhibitions in the Raj capital

Surprisingly, in the last century Calcutta never enjoyed a flourishing society such as the one in Bombay. This had something to do with the Viceroy's prior commitment to Simla. Though a fine art society did not exist until 1889, the Society for the Promotion of Industrial Art had arranged an exhibition as early as 1855 to publicise the school run by it. From the seventies, winter art exhibitions took place in Calcutta, though intermittently. The first one, held in December 1871, included *A Spirited*

Group of Horses (Fig. 35) by Debendra Mallik of the Marble Palace, a student under Locke,³⁴ When the Viceroy, Lord Northbrook, arranged an exhibition in March 1873, it was to celebrate the achievements of government art schools. This was the show that prompted Temple to declare Calcutta the leader in fine art. That winter also saw a public art



34 J. P. Gangooly: *Seascape*, oil. Bombay Art Society gold medal 1910



35 D. Mallik: *A Spirited Group of Horses*, oil, Calcutta fine art exhibition,

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exhibition in the city. The Indian *Charivari* hailed the occasion with a full-page cartoon, 'Rising Genius' (Fig. 36). Students from the art school found ready buyers for their works, but as professionals, they were debarred from the prize competition.⁵

I have chosen 1874, a successful year, to examine the nature of such events in Calcutta. Northbrook and Temple were the moving spirits behind this exhibition, the latter predictably submitting his own works to it. Local zamindars came forward to encourage Indian talent with prizes



and purchases. Prominence was given to the European collections of the English and Bengali residents of Calcutta. Copies of masters - Carlo Dolci, Guido Reni, Titian, Correggio, Terborch, Metzu, Greuze, Watteau, Millais and G. F. Watts - were proudly displayed. Nor were works by British artists in India — the Daniells, George Chinnery, Charles D'Oyly, Edward Lear and Colesworthy Grant — neglected. Of singular historical interest was Gilbert Stuart's painting of George Washington, presented by the residents of Philadelphia to the Bengali shipping magnate, Ramdulal Dey. A pupil of Benjamin West, Stuart's studio in Philadelphia specialised in portraits of the 'father' of the American nation. Dey's own likeness by Chinnery also featured in the show.³⁶

The exhibition did not lack a quota of army officers and art teachers. Among traditional Indian artists, the court painters, Hansaji Raghunath of Baroda (Fig. 37) and Ramaswamy Naidu of Travancore dominated. Naidu carried off the prize for 'the best work by a native artist'. Art students were well represented, led by Pestonji Bomanji of Bombay. At the opening, Temple made clear the imperial mission: 'It is well that the Bengal native youths of this rising generation should, from the time they enter school, by the exhibition of works of art, learn to see all objects of external nature portrayed tastefully and beautifully, so that while their reason is cultivated, simultaneously their imagination may be enlarged, and their taste refined.'³⁷ *The Indian Charivari*, the comic magazine, magnanimously echoed the sentiment:

Appy [sic] is Charivari to be able to congratulate some of the natives... on having shown so much talent for the fine art of painting ... at the Fine Art Exhibition this year in Calcutta. Let them go on and prosper, endeavouring to become real artists instead of mere copyists, as too many of them are at present... Rome was not built in a day ... but there is quite sufficient of the artistic fire developed in some of the pictures to raise hopes of a future race of Indian artists . . .³⁸

The 1879 exhibition was so popular that a second edition of the catalogue was issued. Pestonji, whose star was on the ascendant, received the Viceroy's gold medal with his *Head of a Gosain*. He was the first Indian to win the highest overall prize at a salon exhibition, thereby transcending the label, 'native artist'. But local talents had no reason to feel despondent. Fourteen art-school trained artists contributed sixty-six paintings and drawings from life and one hundred and twenty-two graphic works; they won seven out of nine prizes in the category of native artists. Three successful early artists, Armada Bagchi, Bamapada Bandopadhyaya and Nabakumar Biswas, were among them, the last two winning prizes for figure work and still life. There was also the pre-art-school painter-Gangadhar Dey. The most remarkable feature of the show was 'the presence of twenty-five women artists, most of them Bengali and married.'³⁹

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Following the success of the exhibitions, the Calcutta Art Society was founded in 1889. It held joint exhibitions with Bombay and exchanged student works with it. Jobbins, the Principal of the Calcutta school, gratefully noted the prizes offered by it: 'the impulses given to local art and the incentive to greater excellence produced in the school by the... Society, cannot be overestimated'.⁴⁰ Art societies were the order of the day. Between 1892-3, Bengali artists set up the 'Indian Association for the



37 Hansaji Raghunath:
Maharani Jamma Bai, 1878, oil.

Promotion of Fine Arts and the National Gallery' and the 'Bharatiya Shilpa Samiti' as for a debates on art, thus putting art on the nationalist agenda.

High officials encouraged salon art only as individuals. Official patronage was reserved for the industrial arts. Hence, it was fitting that in 1883—4 the imperial capital played host to the grandly titled Calcutta International Exhibition to encourage art wares. While the organisers spared no pains to procure lifsize traditional sculptures of the west coast, the exhibition was to be above all a demonstration piece on the progress of art schools. The new art teaching claimed to combine the best of East and West. A 'higher class' of decorative work produced by the Calcutta art school was proudly displayed: terracotta vases copied from Greco-Roman antiques, but decorated with relief figures of Hindu inspiration.⁴²

As in other spheres, here too the gradual encroachment of the fine arts was evident. Although the organisers' brief was the industrial arts, since the art policy itself had failed to separate fine and applied arts, paintings and sculptures were not excluded from the exhibition - indeed they were positively encouraged. As the official catalogue announced, even if sculpture 'had never risen to a very high order in India, there [were]' indications that it [was] capable of development'.⁴³

The fine art section was offered as the triumph of western teaching. Gold and silver medals were showered on successful candidates: on oils, watercolours and drawings by the Calcutta Art Studio (CAS), a commercial concern set up by art school graduates, and on copies of Ajanta frescoes by the students of the Bombay art school. The Calcutta students produced life studies in oils, still lifes as well as copies of European paintings in the government art gallery. An educational section demonstrated the progress of art teaching in Bombay - a series of class drawings at various stages of instruction, culminating in life painting and the student copy of an architectural design by Griffiths. Indian and European professional artists, including Theodore Jensen the portrait painter, were also present (Fig. 38). Finally, the Calcutta Art Studio lithographs and Poona Chitrashala Press oleographs, the ideal marriage of western technology and popular art, won accolades.⁴⁴

The taste for academic art spread rapidly through art societies. The process reached a high-water mark in 1876 with the opening of a public gallery in Calcutta amid *bhadralok* rejoicing. The official feeling was that even though exhibitions had helped instil a taste for naturalism in the English-literate, the quality of the works shown there was not the very best. Therefore a permanent display of western masterpieces as an inspiration to the youth of the country was required

not that they might learn to produce feeble imitations of European art, but rather that they might study European methods of imitation and apply then to the representation of scenery, architectural monuments, ethnical varieties, and national costumes in their own country.

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The gallery was the brainchild of two of the most artistically active administrators, the Viceroy Lord Northbrook, nephew of Thomas Baring the great collector, and Sir Richard Temple, who was now the Governor of Bengal. Northbrook gave the lead with a gift of paintings that included two Madonnas by Sassoferrato and copies of old masters. The rest were purchased by officials when they were on leave in Britain. The gallery consisted of a few originals by minor artists and many copies of old masters.⁴⁶



38 Pestonji Bomanji: *Lady Feeding a Parrot*, oil, shown at the 1881 Calcutta exhibition

Temple is worth quoting here as a guide to the official motive behind the Gallery:

In such a place as Calcutta, the establishment of an Art Gallery must be interesting from any and every point of view. But the interest is heightened when the gallery can be the means of daily instruction, [it] will become a lecture room for classes of native students, [it] may impart additional vigour to an institution designed to elevate the taste, refine the skill and enlighten the ideas of the native youth who are learning art as a means of livelihood, and may thus serve an important educational purpose.⁴⁷

GENTLEMEN ARTISTS IN CENTRES OF COLONIAL ART

The artistic personality and its concerns

The students whom Temple had in mind here were the English-literate. An early artist on whom the gallery made a deep impression was Annada Bagchi, for it opened up an exciting new world. The rise of this generation was attested by the influential journalist, Ramananda Chatter-gee: 'the upper strata are gradually losing this disinclination to physical exertion. That men of the upper classes like Ravi Varma and Mhatre are taking to the pursuit of the fine arts is a sign that better days are about to dawn upon the world of Indian art'.⁴⁸ Those wishing to take up an artistic career gravitated to Bombay and Calcutta, places of expanding opportunities, though fewer than Madras for reasons suggested before.

The brief lives of early salon artists that give us an insight into the age are 'Burckhardtian' vignettes rather than chronological portraits. They are meant to fulfil three functions: to provide an overview of the 'explosion' of academic art in India which ousted earlier painting schools; to examine the professional success of its practitioners; and finally to sketch the milieu that encouraged the self-image of these artists as romantic individualists. The patrons, who shared these views, were of two kinds: purchasers of academic works, and indirect ones such as the art-conscious public at large who supported art exhibitions with their presence and criticism. Salon artists began their careers several decades before the rise of artistic nationalism (see ch. 7), though a few long-lived academic artists continued down to the end of the colonial period and even beyond. They belonged to the period of optimistic westernisation, the age when naturalism was accepted as a *sine qua non* of good art. They had drunk at the fountain of Romanticism, which continued to refresh them throughout their lives.

The aspirations of the gentlemen artists were utterly unlike those of the earlier court artists. They were imbued with western individualism that placed a high premium on cerebral work. In the eighteenth century,

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Poussin, for instance, insisted that noble art should give no-hint of craftsmanship, a sentiment endorsed in *The Discourses* of Reynolds, a mentor of Indian academic artists.⁴⁹ To the gentleman artist the artistic act was essentially a self-conscious one that thrived on constant reflection. Such idealisation of artistic individualism led in its turn to the devaluing of communal art in India based on artisanal skill. No mere craftsman, the artist was seen as an intellectual by himself and by his patron. The art school teachers noticed that a decorative painter was not held in high esteem among Indians, and was 'little better than a common mechanic'.⁵⁰

Romanticism in the West had first led to the debasement of notions of artistic craftsmanship. Perhaps no single English word has been more abused in this context than genius. In its modern sense it probably occurs first in Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749): 'By the wonderful force of genius only, without the least assistance of learning,...'. The Romantics placed genius above mere talent; they glorified inventiveness and the self-taught artist. These literary ideas sprouted on the fertile ground of colonial India, creating the image of the charismatic artist - a glamorous image that became firmly lodged in Indian consciousness. Westernised artists in their turn found confirmation of artistic individualism in European literature, in biographies of great artists." Many of them identified themselves with the ideal of the tragic genius, the supreme creator who was prepared to defy philistine society and embrace poverty in the relentless pursuit of self-expression. An extreme consequence of this was to turn in some of the salon artists into solitary figures, driven by their sense of destiny, ploughing lonely furrows, revelling in their isolation. Significantly, when nationalism surged across the country, it was this very individualism that left these artists, with a few exceptions, high and dry. They were simply reduced to anachronisms. For their part, salon artists were unwilling or unable to organise themselves against the emerging forces, apolitical as they were by outlook and temperament. Some of them made halfhearted attempts to re-define their own works by the new cultural criteria of orientalism but they stood little chance of success."

Such profound changes in artistic outlook demanded equally new artistic genres and new criteria of taste. Art was cherished not for craftsmanship but for the idea expressed. Along with the pre-eminence of the artistic *idea*, the mastery of representation was viewed as a sign of a highly developed artistic personality. And what better than the academic portrait, which involved the highest degree of verisimilitude? It was clearly the patron's favourite. Portraiture rapidly overtook other subjects at the art school. 'If our 163 students were asked which branch . . . they would rather cultivate, the majority of them would answer portrait painting', quipped an art teacher in Calcutta. According to a government report of 1888, portrait painters in Calcutta charged between Rs 100 to 300 for life-sized portraits. In comparison, genre scenes fetched only Rs.25

While the high society of Calcutta sat for oil portraits, the ordinary *bhadralok* was willing to be captured by the newfangled machine. Hence, for the failed artist, portrait photography was the last resort so long as he could afford a camera. A contemporary advertisement attests to the popularity of photographic portraits: 'To prevent disappointment, please make an engagement by correspondence. Will wait upon respectable parties at their places when called. Please mark address'.⁵⁵ When the art graduate could not even afford a camera, he spent hours tinting photographs for commercial studios. This 'popular' art in India had blurred the distinction between painting and photography.⁵⁶

The demand for landscapes was limited; so were ambitious history paintings that were beyond the purse of all except the wealthiest. Sculptors were the least in demand and they fared better in Bombay than in Calcutta, as the ground was assiduously prepared by art teachers. In the twentieth century, a steady stream of public commissions came their way: B. V. Talim (1888-1970), a prize-winning sculptor, was responsible for the full-length statue of the early Congress leader, Dadabhai Naoroji, outside Oriental Buildings and of the English judge, Sir Lawrence Jenkins, in the High Court Gardens; G. K. Mhatre sculpted the political leaders, Mahadev Govind Ranade and Gopal Krishna Gokhale. Other Bombay sculptors produced portraits of local dignitaries, Sir Patrick Kelly and Dr Azacio Gabriel Viegas, at 1 national figures, Balgangadhar Tilak, Sir Phirozeshah Mehta and Vithalbhai Patel.⁵⁷

Brief lives of early salon artists of Bombay

Two -early portraitists

Pestonji Bomanji (1851—1938), a Parsi, was one of the first portrait painters from the Bombay art school. Pestonji wished to be a sculptor but since Kipling had already left, he came to Griffiths' notice for his work at Ajanta. In 1877 the art teacher recommended him to Valentine Prinsep, the visiting painter. Bomanji's apprenticeship was short-lived, to gather from Prinsep's account. 'I had brought a Parsee boy from Bombay, who came with a good character, but who turned out utterly useless. On Thursday I told him to pack up my new picture, particularly not to take my old ones', wrote the painter in connection with his visit to Gwalior. But the confused lad had totally misunderstood his instructions. Prinsep continued,

Imagine, then, my horror at finding that my brilliant Parsee had left my new picture, and only brought the old one covered in dust, and sunk in! I confess Most my temper . . . and cursed him audibly. If the Maharaja had not been there, I believe I should have kicked him, and run the chance of

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rupturing his spleen. Here was I, after ten hours' dark and several days travel, with my only chance of painting the great Sindia, and utterly unprepared! I was so angri. I could not work even at my old study.⁵⁸

This was no idle threat, for Prinsep was massive and of a towering height. This brief encounter with Prinsep, however, launched Pestonji into portraiture. In 1894 he became one of the first Indian teachers at the art school after Griffiths failed, to interest the PWD in him. Later, Pestonji officiated briefly as Vice-Principal, the only Indian to do so before this century. When Bomanji set up as a portraitist, Griffiths regularly sent him students to give them experience in oil painting.⁵⁹

No one was more conscious than Bomanji that exhibitions could make or break an artist. Encouraged by Griffiths, he featured regularly at shows around the country. The first Indian to win the top prize in Calcutta in 1879, his success was repeated at the International Exhibition (1883—4) in that city, where his *Parsi Lady Sewing* fetched a handsome price of Rs 500. In 1889, at the inauguralexhibition of the Bombay Art Society, his *Parsi Tiger Slayer* was judged 'the best exhibit by a native artist'. The *Times of India* described his portrait busts as 'realistic and warty', while the unglamourised realism of his work invited comparisons with Dutch realists.⁶⁰ In 1892, 1896 and 1898, he received favourable notices. His well-known work, *The Parsi Girl* (Fig. IV), painted in 1887, was first shown at the Society. Pestonji built up a lucrative practice with the backing of his own Parsi community (see, for example, Fig. 39). When



39 Pestonji Bomanji: *The Parsi Fire Ceremony*, oil

the *Times of India* planned a pictorial album of the luminaries of the empire, it turned to this leading portraitist.⁶¹

Manchershaw Pithawalla (1872-1937) was the second portraitist of the early period. From a village in Surat, he was an exception in having a humble background. Pithawalla was at the art school from 1888 to 1896 as a student of Griffiths. In 1894 he won his first award at the Bombay Art Society, the Only artist to win three successive prizes there, including a gold medal in 1908. Pithawalla's *A Parsi girl* (Fig. 40) won high praise at Simla (1902). In 1905 he was invited to produce an album celebrating the flower of Indian womanhood (Fig. 41). The work was to be presented by the ladies of India to Queen Mary during the royal visit to India."



40 M. F. Pithawalla: *A Parsi Girl*, oil

But to a colonial artist, nothing could compare with an exhibition in London. Pithawalla's one-man show opened on 11 October 1911 at the Dore Gallery. He had arrived in London after an obligatory tour of Italy, fulfilling his dream of gazing at European masterpieces at first hand. He showed twenty-five works produced during his short stay in London, including a view of the Serpentine (Fig. 42). His exhibition coincided with the imminent royal visit to India, when India held the public's attention. It was the first exhibition by an Indian artist, as noted by *The Graphic*. While *The Evening Standard* welcomed it for 'that reason alone',



41 M. F. Pithawalla: *A Parsi Lady*, oil

it added that Mr Pithawalla's work had 'definite merits of its own'. His observation of character was unforced, his poses 'natural' and his handling of figures in interiors tactful.⁶³

The Globe felt that Pithawalla's visit helped complete his training and he was 'not above showing copies of several pictures in the National Gallery, Furse's *Diana of the Uplands*, and Millais' *Northwest Passage*, for instance . . .'. He had also sketched the coronation procession at Hyde Park but 'the artist's best work [was] that accomplished at home, upon sitters of his own nationality, especially the late K. R. Cama, a grey-bearded old gentleman clad in a violent robe and turban . . . With ladies [he was] less successful, notably when he [chose] a broader painting of dress and accessories'.⁶⁴ The Parsi, Sir Mancherji Bhowanagree, the second Indian to be elected a member of Parliament, threw a reception in the artist's honour. Birdwood disclosed that, apart from a few of the verybest, he would prefer Pithawalla to any British portrait painter. The President of the society of British watercolourists graciously suggested that in quickness of capturing a likeness the Indian had scarcely a rival in Britain.⁶⁵

42 M. F. Pithawalla: *The Serpentine*, oil sketch produced in three hours shown at the Dore Gallery, London, 1911.



The lonely furrow of Abalal Rahman

Abalal Rahiman's life (c. 1860-1931) was a painful contrast to the worldly success of the previous two artists it is a cautionary tale of the failure to take advantage of the new cultural institutions, such as art societies. A sadly neglected figure, Abalal seldom showed even in Bombay. He remained dependent on the appreciative, but limited, patronage of the Maharaja of Kolhapur. In this isolation, his art languished.

Abalal learnt Quranic illumination from his father, who worked as a clerk for the Kolhapur state. He also gained experience with local gold-and silversmiths, which in later life helped supplement his meagre income. As a young boy, Abalal was sent to have Persian lessons with the Indian interpreter at the English Residency. While waiting there, he killed time by drawing, which caught the attention of the Resident's wife. She persuaded the Maharaja to offer him a stipend to attend the Bombay art school in 1880.⁶⁶

Abalal's early promise is evident in his school drawings, particularly in chalk (Fig. 43). School reports, which mentioned his precocious talent, expected him to follow in the footsteps of Pestonji. 'He shone at the school as a brilliant student', wrote his contemporary Dhurandhar, 'but adverse circumstances consigned him to oblivion. Otherwise he would have basked in limelight as a leading artist',⁶⁷ It was his mother's sudden death in 1887 that removed him from cosmopolitan Bombay. All he carried back to Kolhapur was his brief painting experience with Griffiths. The short stay in the city had however wrought changes in him. He returned a westernised 'bespoke' dandy, sporting a beard and gold-rimmed spectacles, an object of cariosity in Kolhapur, the first art-school-trained artist in the region.⁶⁸

today, Abalal is remembered for his miniature landscapes of the Kolhapur countryside. We are not sure when he turned to nature, for at the art school he displayed a sensitivity to portraiture (Fig. 44). A lack of portrait commissions and his Quranic upbringing, which frowns upon figure painting, may have turned him towards landscapes. The immediate factor was the tension between him and his stepmother. He was forced to leave home and settle on the outskirts of Kolhapur with only an anchorite for company. The seclusion aroused his curiosity about the minutiae of nature; he probed them relentlessly, thus laying the foundations of his 'miniature' landscapes. His unforced retirement from sock, was viewed by the people in Kolhapur as a sign of the romantic artist, by now an established *topos*. The artist did nothing to discourage it an image reinforced by his lack of a steady income. He could not afford drawing paper, let alone paints, being reduced to using cheap pigments and scrap paper discarded by a nearby press. The kind-hearted Maharaja obtained a teaching job for him at Kolhapur technical school. He also sent a regular supply of food grains to the artist. However, Abalal's preoccupation with

his own creativity precluded him from teaching on a regular basis. The only regular work he did was as a court artist, recording shooting expeditions and formal state occasions, executing mythological pictures, and designing stained glass, metal and ivory objects. With his patron's death, however, abject poverty could no longer be averted.⁶⁹

In the 1920s, the penultimate decade of his life, Abalal produced his



43 Abalal Rahiman: *Portrait of a Woman*, pencil sketch done at the art school, Bombay

mature works, the watercolour landscapes (though he showed a portrait at the BAS at this time). Unable to afford large surfaces, Abalal turned to small works (as small as 5" x 7")- His knowledge of Quranic illumination stood him in good stead here. Being prone to depression, aggravated by financial difficulties, he is said to have destroyed most of his works. The surviving ones show concentration and an eye for detail.



44 Abalal Rahirnan: A *Manilla Lady*, gouache, a late-work possibly exhibited at the Bombay Art Society demonstrates his skill in portraiture

Above all, they display an intimate knowledge of the environment he loved.

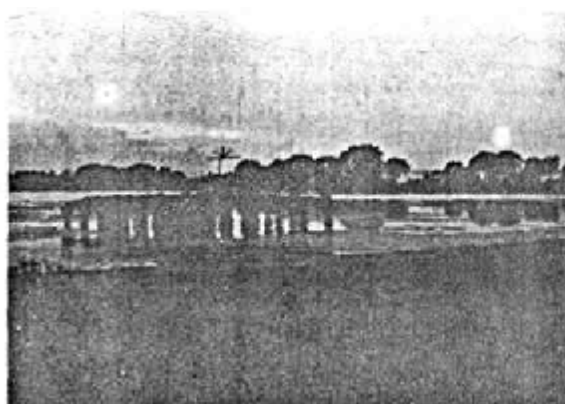
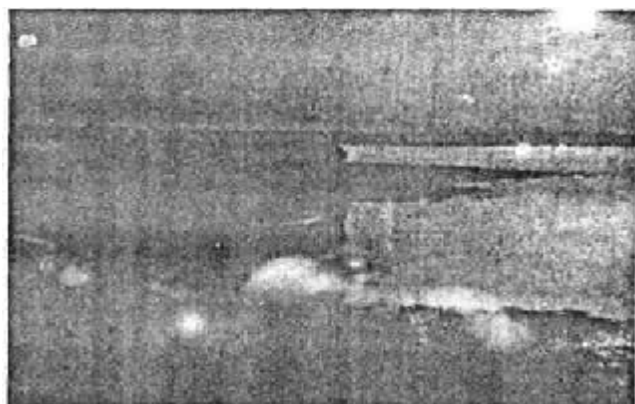
The best known of his probings of the Kolhapur landscape is the lake at Sandhyamath at different times of the day (Fig. 45), which brought out the changing effects of light on water (Fig. 46). Abalal's 'impressionistic' works concentrated on light and texture by reducing intrusive details. He also developed composite landscapes with book illustrations as sources, such as Francis Younghusband's volume on Kashmir. Abalal's landscapes belonged 'tcva' growing genre in India in the wake of a new romantic affinity with nature. Raja Varma was the earliest Indian landscapist but there were also other noted landscape painters. Abalal himself admired Jamini Gangooly.⁷⁰

Abalal remained a bachelor, indifferent to material comforts. A controversial figure, Abalal's devotees saw him as leading a life of uncomplaining stoicism in pursuit of an ideal; his detractors dismissed him as a dissolute alcoholic.⁷¹ The artist's autobiographical fragment plus the testimony of a small band of admirers help us to reconstruct his life. This unembroidered and cryptic document signals to us, with painful clarity, the unrecovered fees, outstanding bills and unaffordable painting materials.. Mornings and part of the afternoons were reserved for painting; the post-prandial hours were spent outdoors in search of landscapes, although the actual works were finished at home (Fig. V). Several paintings were often started at once.⁷² Abalal took up photography to supplement his income. Artistic matters are discussed in this fragment, including the meeting with a European painter, Miss Olivant, a guest of the Maharaja. On being shown by her how she mixed colours, Abalal remarked that her ideas were interesting, but he was too poor to put them into practice. The persistent theme is the absence of financial security.

A spirit of resignation informed Abalal's approaching death and the knowledge of not having fulfilled his promise. The importance of this

45 Left Abalal Rahiman:
Sandhyamath, watercolour

46 Below Photograph of
Sandhyamath



pioneer Muslim painter lies less in his few surviving works than in his romantic personality and a transcendental commitment to art.⁷³

The worldly success of Mahadev Viswanath Dhurandhar

Unlike Abalal, his younger contemporary from Kolhapur, Mahadev Viswanath Dhurandhar (1867-1944), enjoyed a high social standing as artist and teacher, his personal ambition dovetailing into the Raj education policy. Dhurandhar was of the Pathare Prabhu caste, known for its artistic and literary proclivities. Unlike other groups in Maharashtra, eager Prabhu and Brahmin lads had flocked to the new city' (Bombay), leading the field in professional skills.⁷⁴ Dhurandhar's encounter with European art was the stuff of romance. In 1890, smitten with the antiques at the art school, the young lad resolved to be an artist. In this he had his father's support. Highly ambitious, he impressed Griffiths with his habit of sketching after school hours when the average student was engaged in mundane activities. The Principal, Greenwood, also encouraged his single-mindedness.⁷⁵

Dhurandhar's training at the school was interrupted by his father's sudden death, forcing him to think of earning a living. But Greenwood, who did not wish to lose a promising student, secured him a drawing tutorship at a local girls' school. Dhurandhar recalled how terrified he was to face a class full of giggling schoolgirls. In 1896, when one of the Indian teachers at the art school went on leave, he was given charge of the painting class. The government policy was to fill the lower echelons with the ablest Indians, while maintaining European control. Dhurandhar's abilities soon made him Headmaster, the highest post for a 'native' art teacher. He was to remain there most of his working life, though he often displayed greater experience and ability than his European colleagues. He eventually became the school's Director, thus fulfilling Greenwood's prediction. But this was in the last days of the Raj. More than the European principals, Dhurandhar provided the thread of continuity to the school, his career inextricably linked with its fortunes. His *Forty One Years in the Temple of Art* faithfully records the school's progress and standing in the community in its crucial years.⁷⁶

Dhurandhar supplemented his income with printed illustrations (Fig. 47). In 1897 he illustrated Griffiths' article in *the journal of Indian Art*.¹¹ The Maharastrian was prominent among those who joined the expanding market in cheap prints. From the 1890s, a period that coincided with the postcard 'explosion' in the West, he designed postcards for a local manufacturer, the first Indian to do so. Ethnographic postcards, chiefly used by the British to write home, had succeeded the earlier ethnographic paintings. Dhurandhar's ethnographic illustrations were sent to Germany to be printed, then the most advanced country in printing. His *Ayah*

